

THE KITĀB MIṢBĀḤ AL-‘AQL OF SEVERUS IBN AL-MUQAFFA’: A PROFILE OF THE CHRISTIAN CREED IN ARABIC IN TENTH CENTURY EGYPT

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Severus (or Sawīrus) ibn al-Muqaffa’ (c. 905-987) is the earliest Coptic Christian whose name we know who made it a point to write Christian theology in Arabic. Today his name is widely recognized in the scholarly community in the West because, since the early eighteenth century, it has been associated with the influential *Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum*, a reference work which has become indispensable to historians of medieval Egypt.¹ But in the Coptic community his fame rests almost entirely on his prowess as an Arabic-writing apologist for the Christian faith in its Coptic formulation. In the Arabic-speaking world Severus’ apologetic works have been among the most frequently copied and the most widely disseminated of Arab Christian texts. As for the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, Johannes den Heijer has now conclusively shown that it is not a work of Severus, but it is a compilation which has its origins in the work of an eleventh century Alexandrian deacon of the Coptic church, by the name of Mawhūb ibn Manṣūr ibn Muḥarrij al-Iskandarānī.²

The purpose of the present essay is to highlight the career of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa’, the Christian apologist. To this end one might take advantage of the ready availability, in two recent editions, of one of Severus’ more interesting apologetic works, the *Miṣbāḥ al-‘Aql*.³ It is a short work; in fact, it is little more than a pamphlet. But in it Severus provides an outline of Christian faith and practice, and of the apologetic enterprise as he conceives of it. The very brevity of the work puts into high relief the intellectual methods he employs here and elsewhere, and it the most readily identifies the

¹ See C.F. Seybold, *Severus ibn al-Muqaffa’, Alexandrinische Patriarchengeschichte von S. Marcus bis Michael I (61-767), nach der Ältesten 1266 geschriebenen Hamburger Handschrift im arabischen Urtext herausgegeben* (Hamburg, 1912); C.F. Seybold, *Severus Ben al-Muqaffa’, Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum* (CSCO, vols. 52 & 59, Beyrouth/Paris, 1904-10); B. Evetts, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* (PO; Paris, 1904-15), vols. I, 99-214, 381-619; V, 1-215; X, 357-551; O.H.E. Burmester et al., *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church, known as the History of the Holy Church* (4 vols.; Cairo, 1943-1974).

² See J. den Heijer, *Mawhūb ibn Manṣūr ibn Muḥarrij et l’historiographie copto-arabe; étude sur la composition de l’Histoire des Patriarches d’Alexandrie* (CSCO, vol. 513; Louvain, 1989).

³ R.Y. Ebied & M.J.L. Young, eds. & trans., *The Lamp of the Intellect of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa’, Bishop of al-Ashmūnain* (CSCO, vols. 365 & 366; Louvain, 1975); S.K. Samir, *Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa’ (10th century), The Lamp of Understanding* (Arabic Christian Tradition, 1; Cairo, 1978).

interlocutors he has in mind, against whose theses he advances the claims of the Christian doctrines. Given the two editions of the work, it also affords one the opportunity to observe the trials of the modern editors of Arab Christian texts of the Middle Ages and to assess their respective editorial methods. Accordingly, the present inquiry will proceed from a brief review of Severus' life and works, to a consideration of the text and the contents of the *Miṣbāḥ al-'Aql*. From the perspective of the methodological outline of this work, the study proceeds to examine how, within the intellectual milieu of Islam, this Coptic Christian author employed the vocabulary and the intellectual concerns of Muslims to commend the veracity of Christian doctrines.

1. *Severus' Life and Works*

As is the case with so many of the writers of the early Islamic period, not much is known about the biography of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' beyond what can be gleaned from his surviving works, and from brief references to him in other texts. Only two dates are known with precision. A note at the end of one of his works mentions the year "six hundred and seventy-two of the era of Diocletian,"⁴ i.e., 955 A.D., as the year in which he composed the text. In the other instance, Severus' name is mentioned in a letter written in the year 987 A.D. by the Coptic patriarch Philotheus (979-1003) to the Syrian Orthodox patriarch of Antioch, Athanasius V (987-1003).⁵ For the rest, dates in his life must be deduced from references in his works to the patriarch said to be reigning at a particular time.

Most commentators date the birth of Severus between the years 910 and 915. Since he is known to have been an octogenarian, and the year 987 is the latest date recorded in reference to him, they put the time of his death somewhere around the beginning of the eleventh century. Early in his life, as we learn from a number of scribal notes included in the transmission of his works, Severus went under the name of Abū al-Bishr and served as a *kātib* in government service. This circumstance presumably explains the facility he acquired in the Arabic language. At a now unknown date prior to the middle of the tenth century he underwent a religious conversion and entered the monastic life. It was at this point in his career that he adopted the name "Severus," presumably in memory of the great Monophysite bishop, Severus of Antioch (512-518), who had lived in Egypt for many years after his deposition from the patriarchal throne, and who was the principal formulator of the standard Christological doctrine which is at the heart of

⁴ L. Leroy, *Sévère ibn al-Moqaffa', évêque d'Aschmounaïn, Histoire des Conciles (second livre)* (Patrologia Orientalis, 6; Paris, 1911), 590 [126].

⁵ J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticanae* (vol. II; Rome, 1721), 142.

Coptic orthodoxy, based as it is on the theology of the great Cyril of Alexandria (378-444). As for the sobriquet, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (son of the shrivelled, or crippled one), which unfailingly accompanies Severus' name in the manuscripts, one no longer knows to just what circumstance it refers.

It was Patriarch Theophane (953-956) who chose Severus to become the bishop of al-Ashmūnayn, the ancient Hermopolis Magna in the district of Antinoopolis. Today the city is reduced to a small village in the district of al-Roḍa in the province of Asyūt, not far south of modern Minia.⁶ It was in his capacity as bishop of this city that Severus achieved his fame, not only as a writer but as a Christian controversialist.

In the *History of the Patriarchs* Severus is depicted as an active controversialist in behalf of the Christian religion. According to one account he was in league with a man called al-Wāḍiḥ ibn Rajā, who had converted from Islam to Christianity, and had become a monk of Scetis, taking the name of Paul.⁷ Together the two of them met "to examine the books of God for the enlightenment of their minds and their nature, so that they might interpret spiritual books."⁸ Ibn Rajā is said to have gone on to write two books of his own in defence of the faith, directed largely against Muslims. In one of them, according to the *History of the Patriarchs*, he recounts the story of a Muslim convert to Christianity in Baghdad who had become a martyr. He was a member of the reigning dynasty called al-Hāshimī, that is to say, a member of the Meccan clan of al-Hāshim to which Muḥammad had belonged.⁹ Ibn Rajā reportedly heard the story from Severus. In its outline this martyr's story reminds the modern reader of the story of St. Antony Ruwāḥ, or Rawḥ al-Qurashī, who was a Muslim convert from the caliphal family who was executed at al-Raqqa on 25 December 799. The account of his martyrdom was written in Arabic in the Melkite monastic communities of Palestine in the early ninth century.¹⁰ Perhaps Severus had the story from this source and passed it on orally to Ibn Rajā. If so it suggests that Severus, a Copt of the tenth century, was familiar with the Arab Christian literature of Palestine which had begun appearing in the monastic communities there as early as the eighth century.¹¹

⁶ See Stefan Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit* (Teil I, A-C; Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1984), "al-Aṣmūnēn," 198-220.

⁷ See V. Frederick, "Wāḍiḥ ibn Rajā, al," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York & Toronto: Macmillan, 1991) vol. 7, 2311.

⁸ A.S. Atiya, Y. ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, & O.H.E. Khs.-Burmester, *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church* (vol. II, 2, Cairo, 1948), 165 & 110.

⁹ See Atiya, *History of the Patriarchs*, 165-7, 110-12.

¹⁰ See I. Dick, "La passion arabe de S. Antoine Ruwāḥ," *Le Muséon* 74 (1961), 109-33; S.K. Samir, "Saint Rawḥ al-Qurasi; étude d'onomastique arabe et authenticité de sa passion," *Le Muséon* 105 (1992), 343-59.

¹¹ See S.H. Griffith, *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (London:

Another event in Severus' life which the historical sources report with pride is the occasion in the reign of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Mu'izz (969-975), when Severus is said to have gone to the caliph's *majlis* in the company of the patriarch Ephraem ibn Zur'a (975-979), for the purpose of engaging in a debate with a Jew whom the texts call Mūsā, a protégé of the caliph's vizir of Jewish origin, Ya'qūb ibn Killis (930-991).¹² Bernard Lewis has shown that this Mūsā was none other than the caliph's Jewish physician, Mūsā ibn El'āzār, who had accompanied al-Mu'izz from North Africa to Egypt, and whose identity had been masked in medieval Jewish sources under the name Palṭiel.¹³ As for the vizir, he was in fact himself a noted host of debates in his own *majlis*, which on one occasion at least featured Karaites and Rabbinites arguing with one another while the vizir and his Muslim attendants ridiculed Jewish prayers and beliefs.¹⁴ This circumstance will become relevant later in the present study when we will find Severus reporting Karaite beliefs.

Apart from the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, which is often wrongly attributed to him, medieval bibliographers assign more than twenty different titles to Severus. Michael of Tannīs, who was one of the continuators of the *History of the Patriarchs* not more than fifty-some years after Severus' death (1051), claimed twenty works for him,¹⁵ while the fourteenth century bibliographer Abū al-Barakāt ibn Kabar listed twenty-six works.¹⁶ Of these, and more which have come to light only in modern times, only a few, less than a quarter of the total, have been edited and published. Among them is Severus' most popular work, which survives in some sixty manuscripts. It has been entitled by its modern editor, *Kitāb al-durr al-thamīn fī ṭdāḥ al-dīn*.¹⁷ It is a long presentation of the principal doctrines of the Christian religion in its Coptic form, in an Arabic idiom which echoes the Islamic milieu within which it was written. Unfortunately, this work has never been translated into a western language, nor until now has it received any critical study. What is more, it carries the same title, in part, of another work by Severus, which

Variorum, 1992). See also S.K. Samir, "The earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750)," in S.K. Samir & J.S. Nielsen, *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 57-114.

¹² See Atiya, *History of the Patriarchs*, 92-4, 137-40.

¹³ Bernard Lewis, "Palṭiel: a Note," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30 (1967), 177-81.

¹⁴ See M.R. Cohen & S. Somekh, "In the Court of Ya'qub ibn Killis: a Fragment from the Cairo Geniza," *Jewish Quarterly Review* n.s. 80 (1989/1990), 283-314.

¹⁵ Atiya *et al.*, *History of the Patriarchs* II/2, 2-4, 161.

¹⁶ See the list published in G. Graf, "Zwei dogmatische Florilegien der Kopten," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 3 (1937), 61-2.

¹⁷ M. Jirjis, *Kitāb al-durr al-thamīn fī ṭdāḥ al-dīn* (Cairo, 1925). A virtual re-edition of this text appeared in Cairo in 1971, with only minor additions, and the unaccountable omission of chap. IX. In this connection see also R.Y. Ebied & M.J.L. Young, "A Theological Work by Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' from Istanbul: MS Aya Sofia 2360," *Oriens Christianus* 61 (1977), 78-85.

has been only partially published, the *Kitāb al-durr al-thamān fī ṭiqāḥ al-ʿitiqād fī al-dīn*.¹⁸ This book is a lengthy Christological *florilegium* containing patristic texts in Arabic translation which support the theology of the doctrine of the Incarnation as it is presented in the Coptic church. The confusion of titles is symptomatic of one of the major problems facing scholars who study the works of Severus; not only do the titles vary in the manuscripts, but Severus himself often refers to his own books under different titles.

Other published texts of works by Severus include a refutation of his Melkite adversary, Saʿīd ibn Bīṭrīq, Eutychius of Alexandria (d. 940),¹⁹ and a commentary on the Creed which, like the refutation of Eutychius, also goes under the title of the *History of the Councils*.²⁰ Finally, there is an intriguing work entitled by its modern editors *Affliction's Physic and the Cure of Sorrow*.²¹ Unlike the other works attributed to Severus, which are resolutely theological, this one ties in with a well known philosophical tradition of a sort which reminds the editors of Severus' work of Yaʿqūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī's (c. 800-c. 867) *Risāla fī al-ḥīla li-dafʿal-aḥzān*. Indeed, they find parallels both in topics and in language between the two works, sufficient to suggest to them that "the Coptic Bishop may have drawn inspiration from the work of the Muslim philosopher."²²

A concluding word may be said about Severus and the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. Assuming it to be an authentic work of the bishop, there are some scholars who have devoted whole studies to aspects of his literary style and to the evolution of his thought, basing themselves largely on this text.²³ But at the same time recent studies have shown, first, that any role Severus may have played in the composition of the *History* had to

¹⁸ P. Maiberger, "Das Buch der kostbaren Perle," von Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'; *Einleitung und arabischer Text (Kapitel 1-5)* (Wiesbaden, 1972).

¹⁹ P. Chébli, *Réfutation d'Eutychius par Sévère, (le livre des conciles)* (Patrologia Orientalis, 3; Paris, 1905), 125-242 [1-122]. See also G. Troupeau, "Une réfutation des Melkites par Sévère ibn al-Mouqaffa'," in C. Laga, J.A. Munitz & L. van Rompay, eds., *After Chalcedon; Studies in Theology and Church History* (Leuven, 1985), 371-80.

²⁰ See n. 4 above.

²¹ R.Y. Ebied & M.J.L. Young, eds. & trans., *Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', Affliction's Physic and the Cure of Sorrow* (CSCO, vols., 396 & 397; Louvain, 1978). See also S.K. Samir, "Ce que l'on sait de la "Medicina Moeroris et Curatio Doloris" de Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa' (X^e siècle)," *Le Muséon* 89 (1976), 339-52.

²² Ebied & Young, *Affliction's Physic*, vol. 397, vi. On al-Kindī's work see Thérèse-Anne Druart, "Al-Kindī's Ethics," *Review of Metaphysics* 47 (1993), 347-56.

²³ Notable among them is F. Rofail Farag who, in the 1970's, devoted a string of articles to the study of the thought and language of Severus, basing himself almost exclusively on the *History of the Patriarchs*: "The Technique of Research of a Tenth-Century Christian Arab Writer: Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'," *Le Muséon* 86 (1973), 37-66; "A Comparison of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa's Literary Technique in his two Works, the "History of the Patriarchs" and the "Book of the Councils" I & II," *The Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society* 7 (1969-73), 50-3; "The Usage of the Coptic Language as a Constituent Element of the Literary Form of Severus ibn

have been limited to the collection of Coptic texts and their translation into Arabic,²⁴ and secondly, that even this limited role in the end must be denied to him. The recent studies of Johannes den Heijer have made this conclusion abundantly clear.²⁵ Nevertheless, the attachment to the traditional claims to Severus' authorship remains strong in some quarters, with the result that in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* one may still find both contradictory views put forward.²⁶ The fact is that there is no place for the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, or for any part of it, in the list of the Arabic works of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'.

The progression of events in the life of Severus from *kātib* to Christian convert and monk to Coptic bishop is not unique to him. One can point, for example, to the somewhat similar career of Zacharias, Coptic bishop of Sakhā, whose *floruit* was the late seventh—early eighth century.²⁷ The Arabic Jacobite Synaxary for 21 Amschir (February 15) contains a biographical sketch of Zacharias.²⁸ He came from a family of scribes and served for a time as a secretary in the vizir's *diwān*, before becoming a monk in the Monastery of John the Little in the Wadi Natrun, ancient Scetis. He went

al-Muqaffa," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 33 (1976), 275-83; "The Technique of Presentation of a Tenth-Century Christian Arab Writer: Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'," *Arabica* 24 (1977), 66-87, also published in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 127 (1977), 287-306; "The Usage of the Early Islamic Terminology as a Constituent Element of the Literary Form of a Tenth-Century Christian Arab Writer: Severus ibn al-Muqaffa," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99 (1979), 49-57.

²⁴ See D.W. Johnson, "Further remarks on the Arabic History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria," *Oriens Christianus* 61 (1977), 103-16.

²⁵ In addition to the work cited in n. 2 above, see also J. den Heijer, "Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa', Mawhūb ibn Manšūr ibn Mufarrig et la genèse de 'l'Histoire des patriarches d'Alexandrie,'" *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 41 (1984), 336-47; "L'Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie: Récension primitive et vulgate," *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 27 (1985), 1-29; "Réflexions sur la composition de l'Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie: les auteurs des sources coptes," in W. Godlewski, ed., *Coptic Studies; Acts of the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies, Warsaw, 20-25 August, 1984* (Varsovie, 1990), 107-13. See also *idem*, "The Composition of the *History of the Churches and Monasteries of Egypt*: Some Preliminary Remarks," in D.W. Johnson, *Acts of the Fifth International Congress of Coptic Studies, Washington, 12-15 August 1992* (Rome, 1993) vol. II, 209-19.

²⁶ See A. Atiya, "Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa'," *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, 2100-2; and J. den Heijer, "History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria," vol. 4, 1238-42; "Mawhūb ibn Manšūr ibn Mufarrig al-Iskandarānī," vol. 5, 1573-4.

²⁷ See G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (5 vols.; Studi e Testi, 118, 133, 146, 147, 172; Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944-53) vol. I, 472-3; G.D.G. Müller, "Zacharias, Saint," *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, 2368-79. Müller has studied the homiletic style of Zacharias in his *Die alte koptische Predigt (Versuch eines Überblicks)* (Ph.D. diss.; Heidelberg, 1953), 23-4, 61-74, 300-49; *idem*, "Einige Bemerkungen zur ars praedicandi der alten koptischen Kirche," *Le Muséon* 67 (1954), 231-70.

²⁸ René Basset, *Le Synaxaire arabe jacobite (rédaction copte). III. Les mois de Toubeh et d'Amchir. Texte arabe publié, traduit et annoté* (Patrologia Orientalis, XI; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1915), 838-9 [804-5].

on to serve as Bishop of Sakhā (Greek Xoïs, Coptic Sekoou) in the Delta region of Egypt for some thirty years. Zacharias is credited with the composition in Coptic of a panegyric to the monastery's patron saint, John the Little.²⁹ A Syriac version of this panegyric survives in B.L. Add. 14645, a manuscript written in the neighbouring Monastery of the Syrians in A.Gr. 1247, A.D. 935/936 during the abbacy of Moses of Nisibis.³⁰ It is stated in the manuscript that the Syriac *tashʿithā* was translated from Arabic (*leshānā tayyāyā*).³¹ One wonders if Zacharias himself, with his Arabic proficiency, might have been responsible for the Arabic version as well.³²

2. *Kitāb Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql: the Text*

The *Kitāb Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql* is one of the shorter works written by Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ; it is in fact not much more than a pamphlet in length. It survives in three known manuscripts, but only two of them, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, have been available for inspection.³³ Like other works of the same author, so too this one carries slightly different names in the half dozen places where it is mentioned. Samir Khalil Samir has concluded that the original work carried the title *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*, which in due course came to be supplemented by a subtitle, *Al-Istibṣār fī madhāhib al-Naṣārā*, "The Lamp of the Intellect; a Reflection on the Tenets of the Christians."³⁴

At this remove in time it is impossible to know just when in his career Severus wrote the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*, although, given the numerous references in it to earlier works, it is clear that relatively speaking it must come among his later writings. In its form it is an apologetic tract which puts forward and briefly discusses many of the Christian doctrines and practices which

²⁹ The Coptic version was edited and translated into French by E. Amélineau, *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte Chrétienne. Histoire des monastères de la basse-Égypte; vies des saints Paul, Antoine, Macaire, Maxime et Domèce, Jean le Nain &c. Texte copte et traduction française* (Annales du Musée Guimet, 25; Paris: E. Leroux, 1894), 316-410.

³⁰ An edition and translation of the Syriac text, based on two thirteenth century Syriac manuscripts, Paris B.N. Syriac 235 and B.L. Add. 14732, can be found in F. Nau, *Histoire de Jean le Petit. Hégoumène de Scetlé, au IV^e siècle; version syriaque éditée et traduite* (Paris: Picard, 1914).

³¹ W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, Acquired since the Year 1838* (3 vols.; London: British Museum, 1870-72) vol. III, 1116.

³² The Arabic version is extant in a sixteenth century manuscript, Göttingen Arabic MS 114. See P. Peeters, *Orient et Byzance: le tréfonds oriental de l'hagiographie byzantine* (Subsidia Hagiographica, 26; Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1950), 153.

³³ On the manuscripts, and for a detailed discussion of all of the technical matters related to the recovery and identification of the text see S.K. Samir, "Un traité inédit de Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (10^e siècle): 'Le Flambeau de l'Intelligence,'" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 41 (1975), 150-210. See also S.K. Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 64 (intro.)

³⁴ See Samir, "Un traité inédit," 178-84.

are presented at much greater length in other works, like the two which in their modern, published editions are both called *Al-Durr al-thamīn*.³⁵ In his introduction to the work, Severus presents it as an epitome, a presentation in brief of things which he has discussed at greater length elsewhere. He addresses himself to someone who has asked him for a summary presentation of Christian teachings. He says,

You call to mind how the adversaries of our religion find our tenets repugnant and shy away from our doctrines. You have not been able to find a book by anyone of our predecessors in which there is a description of the tenets of the Christians, by way of elucidation and epitome, such as to eliminate their doubts, and to interpret what is vague to them. Everything you come upon by our colleagues is prolix in what it says and professes. You have asked me to provide for you a summary account of our doctrines and to make clear for you the basic concepts of our religion . . . so that both the ignorant person might bear it in mind and the intelligent person might reflect on it.³⁶

After some protestations of his unworthiness for the task he has been asked to perform, Severus goes on to say at the end of his introduction that in the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*, "We have made every effort to elucidate, to summarize, and to make clear. We have left out the argumentation concept by concept, along with the refutation of the adversaries, so as to mention it in the books suitable for it."³⁷ Then, towards the end of the book he reiterates this point. He says, "Because our purpose here is to be brief, we have brought up many concepts without any argumentation for them; you asked us only to give an account of our creed, not to argue against our adversaries."³⁸

Severus discusses seventeen topics in all in the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*. They are: the creator God; the hypostases; Christ; the Incarnation; the Prophets and Apostles; Christ's human functions; the Resurrection; religious Law; Prayer; Fasting; Feast days; Almsgiving; Food; Ordinances and Judgments; Marriage; Divorce; Slaves. Although the book was meant for Christian readers, by the second half of the tenth century when it was written more or less this sequence of topics had become fairly standard in presentations of Christian faith in the Islamic milieu. It includes first of all those doctrines which it was paramount to defend, because they were just about in direct contradiction to the *Qurʾān*. Then there are the standard practices of Christian life, and the rules of conduct according to which Christians might strive to lead their lives. All

³⁵ See above, nn. 17 & 18.

³⁶ S.K. Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 5 (text). For reasons which will become clear below, all references to Severus' *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql* will be to Samir's edition; all the English translations are my own.

³⁷ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 11 (text).

³⁸ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 88 (text).

of these matters had to be set out in Arabic in such a way that they not only rang true to Christian ears, but would fortify the reader in his faith, against the ever present challenge to convert to Islam.

The surprising thing about the *Misbāh al-ʿAql* is that although it is only a minor work of Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, and not a very popular one to judge by the fact that it has survived in only three known manuscripts, in the 1970's it appeared all of a sudden, after centuries of neglect, in two published editions. Undoubtedly its very brevity, and the scarcity of the manuscripts known to contain it, attracted the attention of scholars. But the editions are very uneven in quality.

Ebied and Young's edition is based on a single manuscript, now kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, Paris Arabic MS 212, written in the year 1601 A.D. by the deacon Ibrāhīm ibn Shaykh al-Tāj ibn Yūsuf al-Badhrāmānī, as one learns from the colophon.³⁹ The editors have reproduced in print the text of the work as they have read it in the manuscript. Such corrections as they have seen fit to make are in the notes to the text. The translation then follows not the printed text, but the text as corrected in the notes.

Samir Khalil's edition is in fact based on two manuscripts, the Paris text of 1601 and a manuscript of the year 1787/1788 A.D. from a private collection in Aleppo, which he has been able to consult. He mentions other manuscripts which are reported to contain the work, but he was not able to use them in his edition of the text.⁴⁰ Throughout his edition Samir Khalil has listed the differences between his readings and those of Ebied and Young. Furthermore, his method of editing the text differs radically from that of his predecessors. Taking into account the manuscript witnesses he had at his disposal, Samir Khalil sets down the text in grammatically correct sentences, divided into sense units and liberally supplied with titles and subtitles, all the while relegating to the notes not only the variant readings but most of the words of the text as they actually appear in the manuscripts. His conviction is that medieval scribes are responsible for the many "mistakes" in grammar and orthography which appear in the manuscripts, when they are measured against the conventions of classical Arabic, which he supposes a *kātib* such as Severus would have written. The result is that Samir Khalil's readings of the manuscripts are actually to be found in the notes, and the printed text, in the form in which the reader has it before him, is the editor's reconstruction of the text of the work, in an effort to approach as nearly as possible to that form of the text which in all likelihood, in the

³⁹ See the MS described in Ebied & Young, *The Lamp of the Intellect*, vol. 365, vii-ix.

⁴⁰ See the discussion of the MSS in Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 48-50, 64.

editor's judgment, reproduces the work as it left the hands of its author.⁴¹ What makes his edition preferable to that of Ebied and Young for one who wants to read what Severus actually wrote, is that for all its lack of convention Samir Khalil's edition actually includes a more trustworthy reading of the manuscripts, albeit one must constantly go from the notes, where he prints what he thinks the manuscripts actually say, to the edited text, where he spells out what he thinks they really mean.

3. *Religious Discourse in the Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*

Although the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql* is only a minor work of Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, which seems to have had only a limited circulation when one compares its three or four manuscripts to the sixty or more which are known to contain the much longer *Kūlāb al-durr al-thamīn fī idāḥ al-dīn*, it nevertheless affords one the opportunity to catch a glimpse of Severus' apologetic enterprise in the Islamic milieu in which he lived. It was a milieu of change in Egypt, which involved a dynastic shift in the power structure. Severus certainly began his writing career in the time of the Ikshīdids, and was busy with his histories of the councils during the regency of the eunuch Kāfūr (946-68). But by this time he was already a veteran disputant. In his *History of the Councils, Book II*, which he wrote in the year 955, Severus mentions in passing his debates with a *mutakallim*, who must have been a Muslim, and he says that he would give an account of it in a forthcoming *Kūlāb al-majālis*.⁴² But Muslims and non-Monophysite Christians were not Severus' only adversaries. We have already seen that in al-Muʿizz' reign (953-975), and presumably after the year 973, when the Fāṭimid caliph moved his court from North Africa into Egypt, Severus engaged in a public debate with the caliph's Jewish physician. What is more, he is credited with a book, *Al-Bāḥir fī radd ʿalā al-Yahūd wa al-Muʿtazila*, to which he alludes twice in the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*.⁴³ So it is clear that in the second half of the tenth century in Egypt there was an on-going public debate in Arabic between Jews, Christians and Muslims, in which Severus was an avid participant. The Fāṭimid caliphs themselves seem to have encouraged these debates, which took place at a time when the fortunes of the church were coming to be more and more

⁴¹ Samir has explained his method of editing texts, and his concern for what he calls their *lisibilité*, in S.K. Samir, "La tradition arabe chrétienne, état de la question, problèmes et besoins," in S.K. Samir, ed., *Actes du premier congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 218; Rome, 1982), 52-9, 74-85.

⁴² See L. Leroy, *L'Histoire des Conciles*, 504 [40]. Nothing further is heard of this *Kūlāb al-majālis*.

⁴³ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 34 (intro.).

intertwined with the affairs of the caliphate,⁴⁴ and which would take a dramatic turn for the worse in the reign of the third Fāṭimid caliph, al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (996-1021). But by this time Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ was surely out of the picture.

The *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*, pamphlet though it is, which, as the author himself said, leaves out all of the arguments for the doctrines which it proposes, is nevertheless an abbreviated statement of Severus' whole controversial and apologetic programme. He not only intends to state the beliefs of Coptic Christians in Arabic, but here, as elsewhere, he also intends to sketch the polemical line for his adversaries in the same language. It is in fact the Arabic language itself that is of primary concern to him, because he is aware that in his own day Coptic, hitherto the vehicle of his faith, has effectively passed away.⁴⁵ He put the problem this way in the *Kiṭāb al-durr al-thamīn fī ʿidāḥ al-dīn*, where he wrote:

I recall, my friend, that in these times differing statements about the Orthodox Faith abound among the Copts. Every one of them has an opinion which is at variance with the opinion of every other one, and he calls him an infidel. You are astonished at this and bewildered, but you should not be astonished at it. The reason for this ignorance of theirs involves their language, because the Arabic language has overcome them. There is no one of them left who knows what he is reading about in church in the Coptic language. They have come to the point of hearing but not understanding. And for this reason there has disappeared from among them that knowledge of the Christian creed, which in the beginning had held the upper hand over all the tribes of Christendom.⁴⁶

If, as Severus said, in his day the "Arabic language had overcome" the Copts, it is clear that his own apologetic/polemical programme was aggressively to state Coptic Orthodoxy in Arabic. The programme is evident in

⁴⁴ See M.P. Martin, "Une lecture de l'Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 35 (1985), 22-7. There even survives part of a Christological text which is attributed to the Caliph al-Muʿizz. See L. Massignon, *Recueil de textes inédits concernant l'histoire de la mystique en pays d'Islam* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1929), 215-7. See also G. Troupeau, "Un traité christologique attribué au calife fatimide al-Muʿizz," *Annales Islamologiques* 15 (1979), 11-24.

⁴⁵ On the problem of the historical demise of the Coptic language, see L.S.B. MacCoull, "Three Cultures under Arab Rule: the Fate of Coptic," *Bulletin of the Society for Coptic Archaeology* 27 (1985), 61-70.

⁴⁶ Jirjis, *Kiṭāb al-durr al-thamīn*, 261-2. In the *History of the Patriarchs* there is a passage in a preface, wrongly attributed to Severus, in which the author/compiler says of a number of his Arabophone colleagues that he "begged them to assist me in translating the histories that we found written in the Coptic and Greek languages into the Arabic tongue current among the people of the present day in the region of Egypt, most of whom are ignorant of the Coptic and the Greek, so that they might be satisfied with such translations when they read them." B. Evetts, "History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria," *Patrologia Orientalis* 1 (1907), 115. See also the strong remarks of the eighth century author of the *Apocalypse of*

the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*. Not only does he clearly state the doctrines, but in the process he identifies the adversaries. This feature of the work is particularly interesting because, as noted before, no reasons or arguments for the doctrines are given, but Severus is careful to name his adversaries, as if the very naming of them in this Arabic-speaking milieu is an important part of establishing doctrinal identity. Some of these adversaries are the ancient adversaries of record, others are contemporaries, figures in the Islamic world whose names Severus' readers in tenth century Egypt would presumably be expected to recognize.

Among the ancient adversaries of record Severus mentions the troika, Marcion, Mani, and Bar Dayṣān twice, once as opponents of the true Christian idea of God as a single being (*Allāh jawhar wāḥid*), and once as adversaries of the prophets and messengers (*al-anbiyā' wa al-rusul*) of God, whose laws (*sharāʿ*), he says, Christ came to renew.⁴⁷ Muslims would certainly have had no objection to these allegations, and in this connection, it is interesting to note that the names of these same three adversaries continued to appear not only in Christian texts but in Islamic ones as well.⁴⁸ Similarly, Severus names in the same breath, "Arius, Eunomius, and Plato the philosopher," as adversaries of the Christian idea of one creator God.⁴⁹ And he goes on in the same place to name Aristotle as another adversary, by reason of his idea of the eternity of the world. On the other hand, in another place Severus names Hermes, Plato, Pythagoras, and Amonius as ancient philosophers who used the names "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" in talk about God, in a way congenial to the later Christian usage.⁵⁰

Jews are prominent among the contemporary adversaries whom Severus names in the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*. This is not surprising, given the fact that he was remembered in Christian sources as the man who successfully engaged in public debate with the caliph's Jewish physician. At one point he even mentions that he is the author of a number of books "*fi al-radd ʿalā al-Yahūd*."⁵¹ And indeed the surviving lists of his works do mention two such books.⁵² On the one hand Severus levels familiar charges against the Jews: he mentions "what the Jews did with Christ,"⁵³ and he charges the Jews

Samuel of Qalamūn, in J. Ziadeh, "L'Apocalypse de Samuel, supérieur de Deir-el-Qalamoun," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 20 (1915-17), 379-83.

⁴⁷ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 17 and 48.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., G. Vajda, "Le témoignage d'al-Māturīdī sur la doctrine des Manichéens, des Dayṣānites et des Marcionites," *Arabica* 13 (1966), 1-38.

⁴⁹ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 18.

⁵⁰ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 21.

⁵¹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 88.

⁵² See Graf, "Zwei dogmatische Florilegien der Kopten," 61-2.

⁵³ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 58.

with saying that God forbids almsgiving and doing good on the Sabbath.⁵⁴ He also cites "some Jews and a group of Muslims" who maintain that anyone who goes beyond the prescribed number and mode of the daily prayers is "an insubordinate innovator."⁵⁵ And he puts Jews together with other adversaries in the matter of the proper understanding of the divine attributes. He says, "The Jews, Sabellius, and the Mu'tazila, . . . make the attributes of the Creator names devoid of meanings."⁵⁶ But he can also be specific and even personal in his charges. In connection with the creation of the world, Severus says:

The matter from which the philosophers maintain that the world was created is originated, intelligible, caused. The command in the act of creation (*al-amr fī al-khalq*) did not redound to an angel (*mal'ak*), as the Jews say, nor to a minor god (*ilāh saghīr*) as Benjamin al-Nahāwandī maintains, nor to the stars as Plato says.⁵⁷

What is striking in this passage is that Severus attributes to the Jews in general a view that in his day was ascribed by al-Qirqisānī to the ninth century Karaite, Benjamin ben Moses al-Na'āwandī (c. 830-860),⁵⁸ while to the latter, Severus ascribes by name a doctrine which in fact reflects a Karaite polemical charge against the Rabbanites. Al-Qirqisānī, for example, says that in Rabbanite thought the figure of Metatron, the angel highest in the celestial hierarchy, amounts to a "minor god" (*adonay qatān*).⁵⁹ What is perhaps even more striking is that if Severus should mention any Jewish scholar by name, it should have been al-Na'āwandī, one of whom it is surprising that he would have heard at all. The only reasonable construction to put upon it seems to be a polemical one. That is to say, that Severus would have been aware of the Karaite vs. Rabbanite tension within the Egyptian Jewish community, such as emerged into the open in Ibn Killis' *majlis*,⁶⁰ and that

⁵⁴ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 81.

⁵⁵ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 71.

⁵⁶ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 30.

⁵⁷ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 68.

⁵⁸ Al-Qirqisānī, who wrote in Arabic in the 10th century, spoke of Benjamin al-Nahāwandī as follows: "He asserted that the Creator created nothing but a single angel, and that it was this angel who created the entire world, sent out prophets and commissioned the messengers, performed miracles and issued orders and prohibitions; and that it is he who causes everything in the world to happen without [the interference of] the original Creator." Trans. L. Nemoy, quoted from Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1985), 37. See also H.A. Wolfson, "The Pre-Existent Angel of the Magharians and al-Nahāwandī," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 51 (1960-61), 89-106.

⁵⁹ B. Chiesa and W. Lockwood, *Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī on Jewish Sects and Christianity; a Translation of Kitāb al-anwār, Book I* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1984), 128 and 174, n. 70. I owe this reference to the kindness of Prof. Haggai Ben Shammai of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

⁶⁰ See the work cited in n. 14 above.

having heard the names of prominent Karaite thinkers, he used that of al-Na'āwandi in the passage quoted here for polemical purposes. It is, of course, somewhat ironical that Severus characterizes al-Na'āwandi's views by quoting a phrase used by his Karaite colleagues to discredit a Rabbanite view!

Severus is sparing in naming his contemporary Christian adversaries in the *Miṣbāḥ al-'Aql*. While he is very careful to state the views of Coptic orthodoxy clearly, and even defensively, particularly in that section of the pamphlet in which he discusses food, drink, fatigue, crucifixion and death in connection with Christ,⁶¹ he makes no mention in this connection of the rival Chalcedonians, or Nestorians. In fact he mentions the Nestorians explicitly only in connection with his discussion of marriage and divorce, and then he singles out twice the famous patriarch and *catholicos*, Timothy I (780-823).⁶² Surprisingly in so small a work, Severus does refer by name to two of the Cappadocian fathers of the church, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa.⁶³ In the context of the Coptic church in tenth century Egypt it seems clear that other Christians are really not the adversaries he most has in mind in this small pamphlet. Rather, it is the intellectual challenge of Islam that is his principal concern.

The Arabic diction of the *Miṣbāḥ al-'Aql*, like Severus' other apologetic works, seems overwhelmingly Islamic, even when he is talking about things specifically Christian. He makes his case for the credibility of Christian teaching by couching his arguments in the terms of issues actively under debate in the Islamic community, and particularly among the *mutakallimīn*. But the most significant presence of Islam in the *Miṣbāḥ al-'Aql* is the way in which the faith of the *Qur'ān* sets the very parameters of the religious discourse in the work, and even determines the topics and the order in which they come up for discussion. As a small book, even a pamphlet, with all of the arguments left out of it, and with all of the references Severus includes in it to other works of his own, some nine in all, it puts into high relief just how determining Islam has become, even for the presentation of Christian theology in Arabic. The book allows us to see that the challenge before Severus was not just to translate Coptic Christianity into Arabic, but to accommodate the presentation of the faith to the new world order. For by Severus' day Islam in Egypt had in large part already brought about a "unified society," which Albert Hourani has recently described so evocatively. He wrote:

By the third and fourth Islamic centuries (the ninth or tenth century A.D.) something which was recognizably an "Islamic world" had emerged. A trav-

⁶¹ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 49-61.

⁶² See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 92, 94-5, 98.

⁶³ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 51 and 75 respectively.

eller around the world would have been able to tell, by what he saw and heard, whether a land was ruled and peopled by Muslims. . . . The great buildings above all were the external symbols of this "world of Islam. . . ." By the tenth century, the men and women in the Near East and the Maghrib lived in a universe which was defined in terms of Islam. . . . Time was marked by the five daily prayers, the weekly sermon in the mosque, the annual fast in the month of Ramadan and pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Muslim calendar.⁶⁴

The Arabic language was, of course, the principal carrier of the Islamic culture. And concerning the Copts of his day Severus said, as we have already mentioned twice, "the Arabic language has overcome them."⁶⁵ So the challenge was obviously to transmit the traditional faith of the church in an Arabic idiom, the religious vocabulary of which was already in large part co-opted by Islam. Severus himself realized this fact and he adverted to it at the beginning of the *Kitāb al-durr al-thamīn fī ʿidāḥ al-dīn*, as he was beginning his discussion of the mystery of the Trinity. He said:

I say that the reason for the concealment of this mystery from the believers at this time is their association with foreigners. And due to the loss of their original Coptic language, in which they used to become acquainted with their own doctrine, they have come to the point of not hearing any mention of the Trinity among themselves except rarely, nor is there any mention of the "Son of God" among them except in the way of a figure of speech. Rather, most of what they hear is that God is singular (*ṣard*), everlasting (*ṣamad*),⁶⁶ and the rest of that kind of language which "the others" (*al-ghayr*, i.e., the Muslims) speak. The believers have become accustomed to it and they are brought up on it, with the result that the very mention of "the Son of God" has come to the point of being difficult for them, and they are not aware that it has any explanation or meaning. Most of them, when they hear of "the Son of God," and "the Son of the Virgin Mary" suppose that his beginning was from the Virgin Mary, exactly as "the others" suspect we are saying. They do not know that he is eternally with God, born of Him before Mary and before all the ages, because God has never ever been without him, because he is His Son, his eternal Word, who has always been, and never will cease to be with Him.⁶⁷

It was not just a matter of apologetics and polemics, but of Christian theology in a new key. For Severus' challenge was not only to rebut the objections of Muslims or Jews to Christian doctrines, but to articulate in a new idiom for a new milieu the Christians' own understanding of themselves and of their faith. The result, as we see it in the theological works of Severus

⁶⁴ A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 54-7.

⁶⁵ Jirjis, *Kitāb al-durr al-thamīn*, 261.

⁶⁶ See Q 112:2.

⁶⁷ Jirjis, *Kitāb al-durr al-thamīn*, 7-8.

ibn al-Muqaffa' is a particularly eloquent instance of a new profile in Christian thought, one which acculturates the expression of the faith to the Arabic-speaking world of Islam. This new profile is especially well put into high relief in the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*, precisely because of its summary, outline-like character.

It is important to give due emphasis here to the point that what Severus wrote is not merely apologetics or polemics. Nor is it simply a matter of putting Greek or Coptic words and phrases into the Arabic language, as if the confessing mind behind it remained unaffected by the idiom of Islam. Rather, Islam and the Arabic *Qurʾān* evoked a new expression of Christianity which in many ways has the marks of doctrinal development about it. Before the time of Severus, and after him too, other Arab Christian writers faced the same challenge, and it is remarkable how concordant is the profile of the expression of the faith in the Islamic milieu that we find in the works of each one of them. In the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql* it is as if it was Severus' primary purpose to highlight this profile for its own sake. It is not claiming too much to say that the line of thinking which is evident in this theological profile became the structural framework of the Arabophone Christian's way of expressing the faith in "Islamic" terms, of formulating the traditional truths of Christianity in Arabic in response to the ever more insistent call to Islam. The fact that some modern, western commentators with more evangelical concerns, have found this Arabic statement of Christian identity wanting, does not mean that Christianity has failed in Arabic. It simply means that few moderns have taken the trouble to read the Arab Christian religious texts on their own terms.⁶⁸

In Severus' *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql* one may consider the Arab Christian profile of theological identity both in a comprehensive way, and as it manifests itself in particular issues. From the comprehensive perspective it is instructive to take note of the fact that of the seventeen topics the work discusses, fully ten of them are not doctrinal points of belief at all. They concern the practice of the Christian life, matters of law and religious observance, such as times of prayer, fasting and feasting, as well as the rules governing almsgiving, food, marriage, divorce, and slaves. One finds this same conjunction of topics, with some variations among the practical matters, discussed in many other Arab Christian summaries of the faith.⁶⁹ It reminds the reader that in the Islamic context, it was not uncommon for Christians to be asked

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian; a History in the Middle East* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). See also S.H. Griffith, "Kenneth Cragg on Christians and the Call to Islam," *Religious Studies Review* 20, 1 (Jan., 1994), 29-35.

⁶⁹ See S.H. Griffith, "Ḥabīb ibn Ḥidmah Abū Rāʾiṭah, a Christian *mutakallim* of the First Abbasid Century," *Oriens Christianus* 64 (1980), 161-201.

about religious practice.⁷⁰ For while the *Qurʾān* says, "Let the Gospel people judge according to what God has sent down in it," (Q 5:47) Muslims were aware that the Gospel in the form in which Christians have it, does not contain those practical rules of behaviour such as are in the *Qurʾān*. Rather, Christians conducted their daily affairs in compliance with the ancient canons of the church, many of which are reflected in the *Miṣbāh al-ʿAql*. The fact that so many of the brief, compendious statements of Christian faith in Arabic do contain rules for such things as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving suggests that in the Islamic world, so conscious of religious *praxis*, Christians too became concerned for their distinctive observances, putting an emphasis on them that was uncommon in texts other than homilies or collections of canons prior to the consolidation of the Islamic commonwealth.

Another comprehensive feature of the *Miṣbāh al-ʿAql* is Severus' use in it of Arabic words and phrases which have a decidedly Islamic cast to them. One cannot list them all here, but a few notable instances will suffice to make the point. For example, in the introduction Severus speaks of the *madhāhib al-Naṣārā*,⁷¹ using the *Qurʾān*'s word for "Christians" (e.g., in Q 2:62), when otherwise it would seem more likely to find a Christian writer like himself speaking of *al-madhhab al-masīhī*.⁷² Similarly, he readily uses the *Qurʾān*'s word for "Gospel," i.e., *al-injīl* (e.g., in Q 3:3), which one seldom if ever finds in earlier Arab Christian texts. He uses the *Qurʾān*'s term *aḥbār* (e.g., in Q 5:44) to refer to the patriarchs and wise men of the Jews.⁷³ He speaks of *al-rusul wa-al-anbiyāʾ*,⁷⁴ evoking thoughts of the prophetology of the *Qurʾān*. He refers to God "sitting on *al-ʿarsh*," echoing the *Qurʾān*'s way of speaking (e.g., in Q 7:137). Prominent too in Severus' talk of God are the *ṣifāt Allāh*, the *Qurʾān*'s "beautiful names" of God,⁷⁵ which figured so importantly in the discussions of the contemporary *mutakallimūn*, Muslim and Christian alike. And there are other words and phrases in the idiom of the *Qurʾān*, such, for example, as *al-nashr wa-al-ḥashr* (Q 50:44), or *sarmadī* (Q 28:71-2), which had already passed into the general religious vocabulary, even of Christians, and inevitably shaped their conceptions of the ultimate realities. The point of mentioning this representative selection of the *Qurʾān*'s diction in Severus' work at all is simply to highlight the comprehensive way in which this use of Arabic to set forth Christian teaching already betrays the shaping influence of Islam in Christianity's new kerygmatic expression.

⁷⁰ The *praxis* issue came up in the earliest dialogue texts. See, e.g., F. Nau, "Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l'émir des Agariens," *Journal Asiatique* 11th series 5 (1915), 225-79.

⁷¹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 5, 92, 100.

⁷² See, e.g., Jirjis, *Kutāb al-durr al-thamīn*, 20 and *passim*.

⁷³ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 7.

⁷⁴ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 34 and 37.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 61, 67.

Undoubtedly, the most comprehensive feature of the profile of Christian thought in Arabic, as it is discernible in Severus' *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*, or indeed in any other Arab Christian work, is the response to the *Qurʾān*'s challenge to the inter-related doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Inevitably, every treatise in Christian *kalām* addresses these issues as the first order of business, and they do in fact also affect the discussion of all other topics.⁷⁶ It has been the concern of many modern commentators to analyse in some detail the language which the Arab writers employ to render the traditional Greek, Syriac, or Coptic Trinitarian and Christological terms into Arabic. But a problem has also come to the fore in this enterprise, and it is twofold. In the first place, some scholars often seem to assume that for the Arab writers of Christian *kalām* it was simply a matter of substituting Arabic terms for the technical terms of Greek Trinitarian theology, and that there is nothing much to be concerned about in the variety of terms one finds in different works by the same author, or in the works of different authors over a considerable length of time, and in many different milieux.⁷⁷ To take this approach is to accept the presupposition that there was no re-thinking of the best way to express Christian doctrine in terms of its presentation in the idiom of Islam. The corollary is the faulty notion that precise lexical studies are unnecessary in Arab Christian texts. In the second place, scholars of these texts have often ignored the fact that Islam has not only determined that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation will certainly come up for discussion in Christian Arabic treatises, but the burgeoning religious sciences of the Muslims, particularly in the ninth and tenth centuries, inevitably shaped the discourse and the thinking of the Christian writers who addressed themselves to these topics.⁷⁸

Severus' *Kitāb al-Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql*, precisely because of its brevity and its schematic character, allows one to observe these processes at work in their sharpest outline. Due to the restraints of time and space we limit ourselves here to studying his presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Two chapters of the book are dedicated to this topic under the titles: "Our Doctrine of the Creator; Faith in the One God," and "Our Doctrine of the *aqānīm*."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ For example, in the *Kitāb al-durr fī ʿidāḥ al-ʿitqād fī dīn* Severus begins and ends his presentation of Coptic Christology with discussions of the Trinity and Unity of God, in chapters 1 and 15. See Maiberger, *Das Buch der kostbaren Perle*, 73-4, 118-20.

⁷⁷ An example of this approach is the work of R. Haddad, *La Trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes (750-1050)* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985).

⁷⁸ For an early example of this phenomenon see S.H. Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian *Kalām*: Theodore Abū Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion," in Samir & Nielsen, *Christian Arab Apologetics during the Abbasid Period*, 1-43.

⁷⁹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 12-32. It is customary to translate the term *al-uqnūm* (pl. *al-aqānīm*) into western languages using the transliterated Greek term *hypostasis*, which has a very precise meaning in theological texts. The Arabic term is similarly a transliterated one,

Severus begins his chapter on the Christian doctrine of the one God by straightaway invoking the attribute of God as Creator (*al-bārīʿ*, *al-khāliq*), and by using it continuously throughout the discussion. This is immediately to claim common ground with both Jews and Muslims, with whom he was in constant doctrinal controversy, but with whom on this point he is in complete agreement, against the claims of certain philosophical schools whose influence was popular in the Islamic world of the tenth century.⁸⁰ Next, Severus moves directly to the statement of the Christian Trinitarian faith which it will be his purpose to explain, if not to defend, in what follows. He says of the Creator God, "We acknowledge Him to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one being (*jawhar*),⁸¹ one nature (*tabīʿa*), and one essence (*dhāt*)."⁸² And he explains that Christians only say Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the first place, "as the Gospel (*al-injīl*) has taught us."⁸³ This claim is itself a strong one in the Islamic milieu in which it is maintained that on this very point Christians have corrupted the teaching of what the *Qurʾān* calls the *injīl* which God gave to Jesus, son of Mary, to transmit to his people.⁸⁴

The first of the two major issues to which Severus addresses himself in this chapter is the sense of his affirmation that the Creator God is a "single being" (*jawhar wāḥid*), and this inquiry leads him to distinguish between two groups of scholars in the Islamic world of his time whose business

from the Syriac technical term *qnūmā*, which, *mutatis mutandis*, in Christian theological texts has much the same meaning as the Greek term *hypostasis*. While the Greek term has immediate recognition in western theological language, to use it alone to translate *al-uqnūm* removes the contextual nuances of the Arab Christian text, in which it evokes the consciousness of the Islamic rejection precisely of "the *aqānīm* of the Christians." See S.H. Griffith, "The Concept of *al-uqnūm* in 'Ammār al-Baṣrī's Apology for the Doctrine of the Trinity," in S.K. Samir, ed., *Actes du premier congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes* (Goslar, septembre 1980) (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 218; Roma: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1982), 169-91; B. Holmberg, "The Trinitarian Terminology of Israel of Kashkar (d. 872)," *ARAM* 3 (1991), 53-81.

⁸⁰ In modern Christian statements of faith within the Islamic context, this starting point is also sometimes invoked. See, e.g., S.K. Samir, "Une lecture de la foi chrétienne dans le contexte arabo-musulman," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 42 (1992), 64.

⁸¹ Scholars often translate this Arabic term into English as "substance," as do Ebied and Young in the present instance. See Ebied and Young, *The Lamp of the Intellect*, vol. 366, 3. However, the Greek term which underlies it in the present context is *ousia*, which is better represented in English in the present context as "being." See J.L. Kramer, *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam: Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī and his Circle* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 188-90.

⁸² Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 12.

⁸³ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 12.

⁸⁴ On the subject of the alleged "corruption" of the scriptures, see I. Goldziher, "Über muhammedanische Polemik gegen Ahl al-Kitāb," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländische Gesellschaft* 32 (1878), 341-87; I. Di Matteo, "Il tahrīf od alterazione della Bibbia secondo i Musulmani," *Bessarione* 26 (1922), 64-111, 223-60; W. Montgomery Watt, "The Early Development of the Muslim Attitude to the Bible," *Glasgow University Oriental Society Transactions* 16 (1955-6), 50-62; J.-M. Gaudeul and R. Caspar, "Textes de la tradition musulmane concernant le *tahrīf* (falsification) des écritures," *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980), 61-104.

it was to be concerned about the definition of terms. Severus characterizes them as the “disputants” (*jadalīyyūn*), and the “logical philosophers” (i.e., logicians).⁸⁵ This dichotomy fairly well reflects the division and the rivalry between philosophers and *mutakallimūn* in Severus’ day, as it was reflected in the literature of the time under the guise of the debate between Arabic Grammar and Greek logic.⁸⁶ Severus’ point in mentioning these two groups is to situate his use of the word *jawhar* (*ousia*, “being”) to designate the one Creator God within the parameters of the contemporary learned discourse in Arabic about God and the ultimate realities. He goes on to point out that no other term which theoretical language provides on the requisite level of abstraction is apt. God cannot be said to be a “body” (*jism*), which some people, namely the logicians, say even the word *jawhar* implies, because none of the “descriptive attributes” (*sifāt*) of originated entities (*muḥdathīn*) attach to God, viz.: composition, division, dissolution, coming to be, disintegration, time, or place. Neither can God be said to be an accident (*‘araḍ*), because, as Severus says, in the Jewish and Islamic context within which he was reasoning, “there is the consensus (*al-ijmā‘*), already arrived at, to the effect that the Creator, mighty and exalted be He, is eternally and everlastingly existent (*maʾwǧūd*), and in fact, having no need in his existence for any other, because He subsists in his own essence (*qā’im bi-dhātihī*).”⁸⁷ Therefore, of the available designations for entities (i.e., *jawhar*, *jism*, or *‘araḍ*) allowed by the “disputants” and the “logicians,” when the talk is of God one says that He is *jawhar*, i.e., a substantial being in His own right, because it is impossible that He be a “body,” or an “accident.”

But even with the term *jawhar* there are difficulties, as Severus was quick to point out. For example, he says that he does not want in this connection to go so far as Aristotle did, and, we might add, as the Arabic-speaking logicians of his own day were doing, to speak about the so-called “first substance” and “second substance” concepts in connection with his use of the term *jawhar* in regard to God. Rather, says Severus, “we only mean He is different from all the bodies, accidents, and imaginable substantial beings (*jawāhir*), because He is existent (*maʾwǧūd*) in actual fact, without any need in his existence (*wǧūd*) for anything else.”⁸⁸

As for saying that God is one, or a single being (*jawhar wāḥid*), Severus

⁸⁵ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 14. Ebied and Young unaccountably read *jūliyyūn* for *jadalīyyūn*. See Ebied & Young, *The Lamp of the Intellect*, vol. 365, 3 and n. 3.

⁸⁶ See M. Mahdi, “Language and Logic in Classical Islam” in G.E. von Grunebaum, ed., *Logic in Islamic Culture* (Wiesbaden, 1970), 51-83; G. Endress, “The Debate between Arabic Grammar and Greek Logic in Classical Islamic Thought,” *Journal for the History of Arabic Science* (Aleppo) 1 (1977), 320-2 (English Summary), 339-51 (Arabic); 2 (1978), 181-92 (Arabic).

⁸⁷ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 15.

⁸⁸ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 17.

explains that by this affirmation he means to exclude the option of polytheism. And it is in this connection that he mentions as adversaries not only the "pagans and idolators (*al-ḥunafā' wa-al-wathanīyyūn*)," but Mani, Bar Dayṣān, and Marcion as well. In addition to these names Severus also includes here Arius, Eunomius and Plato "the Philosopher." Certainly the first two in this listing are somewhat surprising. It signifies that in Severus' opinion, echoing that of the Cappadocian fathers, Arian theology in its implications effectively compromises the unity of God. Finally, it is also in this connection that Severus mentions the incompatibility with Christian doctrine of what he reports as Aristotle's conception that "the Creator is the whole world and that all is pre-existent."⁸⁹ In summary then, the Christian teaching, according to Severus, is that God is "a single *jawhar*, which does not bear a resemblance to any of the *jawāhir* of the world."⁹⁰ In the Arabic-speaking context of the Islamic *kalām*, this last affirmation is an important one.

Having strongly affirmed Christian monotheism in the formula familiar to the Arabic-speaking scholars of his day, namely, that the Creator God is a single *jawhar*, Severus then goes on to explain that having taken this position, Christians nevertheless also maintain that "this Creator (*khāliq*) is "living" (*ḥayy*), "speaking" (*nāṭiq*), and His "speaking" (*nuṭq*) is his Word, and His "living" (*ḥayāh*) is His Spirit."⁹¹ Unlike earlier Arab Christian writers, e.g., Theodore Abū Qurra,⁹² Severus does not here offer any reason why these two attributes should be singled out from the ninety-nine "beautiful names" of God as signifying any special ontological features of divinity. Rather, here he presumes that the Christian doctrine is known and he confines himself to explaining its terms in an idiom that is common-coin in the Arabic lexicon of religion.

Severus explains that Christians call God's "speaking" (*nuṭq*) his "Son" because it is "generated from his essence (*mutawallad min dhātihi*)," and "language scholars (*ahl al-lughāt*) call whatever is generated from the essence of something a 'son.'"⁹³ Severus goes on to claim that as a result of this explanation stubborn contentiousness actually subsides because, he says, "the objective is only the verity of the referents (*ma'ānī*) more than the names, because names only make a point."⁹⁴ With this line of reasoning Severus makes

⁸⁹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 18.

⁹⁰ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 18.

⁹¹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 19.

⁹² See S.H. Griffith, "The Controversial Theology of Theodore Abū Qurrah (c. 750-c. 820 A.D.); a Methodological, Comparative Study in Christian Arabic Literature," (The Catholic University of America; Washington, D.C., 1978).

⁹³ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 20.

⁹⁴ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 22. This passage is radically different in Ebied and Young, *The Lamp of the Intellect*, vols. 365 and 366, 5, where the Arabic text is read differently.

contact with an issue that was the subject of a considerable amount of discussion and controversy among the Muslim *mutakallimūn* of his day, who were keenly debating the linguistic and ontological significance of terms such as *ism*, *ma'nā*, and *ṣifa*, precisely in connection with the ontological status of the divine attributes.⁹⁵ For his part, Severus is anxious to clarify the import of Christian claims as they find expression in Arabic.⁹⁶ So he manages to put the Christian talk of God's "Son" as God's Word (*kalima*) in the context of God's "speaking" (*nuṭq*), which is the "referent" or "meaning" (*ma'nā*) of the descriptive attribute (*ṣifa*) "speaking" (*nāṭiq*) when it is used of God.

As for the Spirit, Severus cites the scriptures as the main source for speaking of the "Spirit of God." But he does also point out that it is reasonable to give the name "Spirit" to the "life" (*ḥayāh*) in virtue of which God may be said to be "living" (*ḥayy*), because the language scholars say that to destroy someone's spirit is to take away his life, or to kill him.⁹⁷ So even here he is able to appeal to the conventions of Arabic usage, like the *mutakallimūn*, to make his point. As for calling God's Spirit "holy," Severus explains that it is to differentiate the Holy Spirit from the many spirits of which one might speak.

Arabic-speaking Christians talk of God the Father, his Word, and his Spirit, as three *aqānīm* of the one *jawhar* of the Creator God. And so Severus undertakes to explain the sense of this Syriac word as it is used in Arabic. He says, "In saying *aqānīm* we only mean that as they are descriptive predicates (*ṣifāt*) of this *jawhar*, they are subsistent, constant, eternal, everlasting, and they are not like the *ṣifāt* which come to be and cease to be, nor are they like accidents which pass away and decompose."⁹⁸ The operative word here for Severus is *ṣifa*. He uses it in the same way as the Muslim *mutakallimūn* of his day. It signifies a descriptive predicate which has as its meaning, or referent (*ma'nā*), an attribute or actual fact, the existence of which in turn is said to be the cause or ground (*ʿilla*) of the predicative attribution in the first place. So, in the present instance Severus explains that God's factual "speaking" (*nuṭq*) is the referent (*ma'nā*) of the descriptive predicate (*ṣifa*) "speaking" (*nāṭiq*). But, because God's "speaking" is of necessity "subsistent" (*qā'im*) and "constant" (*thābit*), one might say that the divine essence (*dhāt*) is itself the *ʿilla*, or cause, of the attribution of "speaking" (*nuṭq*) to God, and so God's "speaking" may be said to be "essential" (*dhātī*) and "substantial" (*jawharī*). He goes on to argue that anyone who would deny the subsistence

⁹⁵ See R.M. Frank, *Beings and their Attributes; the Teaching of the Basrian School of the Mu'tazila in the Classical Period* (Albany, N.Y., 1978).

⁹⁶ See his brief excursus on just this point in Jirjis, *Kitāb al-durr al-thamīn*, 21-2.

⁹⁷ See Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 23.

⁹⁸ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 27.

of God's "speaking" (*nuṭq*), or of his Spirit for that matter, "would be denying what they already confessed, and disavowing that of which they had affirmed the existence."⁹⁹ And he cites as cases in point, the Jews, the Sabellians, and the Mu'tazila. This list of adversaries immediately constructs the framework of Severus' apologetic discourse. All three groups affirm the existence of the Creator God. But the Jews deny the individual subsistence of God's Word and Spirit. Christian heretics, such as the Sabellians, particularly in connection with their theology of the Word of God, adopt the Monarchian view according to which the Word, or the Spirit, is but a mode or an operation of the Godhead. And in this they are similar to the Mu'tazila who as a group affirm that God speaks, but say that God's "speaking" is an act of speaking that is He, and not a distinguishable divine subsistence in its own right.¹⁰⁰

Here is the point at which Severus introduces the Christian concept of *al-uqnūm* as it applies to God's Word and Spirit. He says, "We mean that the *ṣifa* of this *jawhar* is subsistent, constant, intelligible, distinguishable. It does not dissolve like accidents, nor does it vanish like sounds and all the speech (*kalām*) of created beings, and like their life and their spirits."¹⁰¹ He mentions the fact that in Arabic a number of his predecessors have attempted to interpret, or to paraphrase the term *aqānīm* in one or several terms such as *ashkhāṣ*, *khawāṣṣ*, *ma'ānā*, or *ṣifāt*. But Severus himself claims to have given the clearest account of the matter and that it is of no great significance what terms one uses if the meaning (*ma'na*) is the same. In this connection it is interesting to note that in his own most popular elucidation (*idāh*) of the Christian faith, Severus himself consistently refers to God, his "life" and his "speaking" as the three "particularities" (*khawāṣṣ*), Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹⁰²

In the *Miṣbāh al-ʿAql* Severus leaves his discussion of the Trinity at this point and goes on to the topic of Christology. But enough has been said here to highlight his method, and particularly to show how his pre-occupation is to phrase Christian doctrine in an Arabic diction which accurately expresses the Coptic faith. His pre-occupation with language is particularly striking, and this concern distinguishes his work from much earlier Christian theology in Arabic. But the shaping effect of Islam is also clearly evident in the profile of the Christian creed as Severus presents it.

⁹⁹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Discussions of the these matters among the Mu'tazila were in fact quite complicated. See Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyin* (H. Ritter, ed., 2 vols.; Istanbul, 1929 and 1930), vol. I, 157-68.

¹⁰¹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 31.

¹⁰² See, e.g., Jirjis, *Kilāb al-durr al-thamīn*, 20.

In the Christological sections of the *Miṣbāḥ al-ʿAql* Severus' purpose was not to argue the numerous issues which divided the Christians in his day. Such was the aim of several of his other works. Rather, in the *Miṣbāḥ* his concern was clearly to state the creed—what Coptic Christians believe about Christ. While he could not draw on the intricacies of Islamic thought about God to aid his exposition, as in the discussion on the doctrine of the Trinity, he did nevertheless make ample use of the testimonies of the earlier “messengers and prophets” to make his points.

In the first place, Severus says simply: “For us the Messiah is the Word of God, His Wisdom and His Power, as scripture says (1 Cor. 1:24) and we call him “Messiah” following God’s own manner of speaking in His scriptures.”¹⁰³ He points out that in Greek “Messiah is interpreted as ‘one anointed’ (*al-madhūn*), i.e., ‘Christ.’” Specifically, he goes on to say, the name “Messiah” is used in connection with Jesus in the Gospel’s account of his encounter with the Samaritan woman (cf. John 4:29), and there was already the consensus that a “messiah” would come after “the messengers and the prophets.”¹⁰⁴ But the crucial point for Severus, following several of the fathers, he says, is the fact that “the Word did unite with a body and the union is an anointing (*al-maṣḥa*). For he was only anointed because he was embodied, and “embodiment”/“incarnation” (*al-tajāssud*) is the name of his anointing.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, he says, “the Word is named “Messiah” because it (the Word) is to be particularized (*makhṣūṣa*) by reason of the fact that it will become embodied/incarnate.”¹⁰⁶ His point is to make it clear, against his Christian adversaries, that just as the “Son” of God is the “Son” before his second birth in human form, so is the “Messiah” to be named “Messiah” before the union of the divine and the human in the Incarnation. This was an important point in the Christological position Severus defended so vigorously against Nestorians and Chalcedonians alike.

As for the Incarnation itself, Severus was anxious to put the Christian doctrine in the context of God’s earlier appearances to the messengers and prophets as recorded in the scriptures. He says, “As for the one who speaks to us from the visible, perceptible body, he is the one who was speaking to Moses from the cloud, as well as to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the rest of the prophets, and he is the one who disclosed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Noah.”¹⁰⁷ Given this sense of the Incarnation, it was then Severus’ concern to explain how Christians understand the human actions ascribed to Christ.

¹⁰³ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 34.

¹⁰⁶ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 45.

For as he put it, "Our opponents . . . suppose that we ascribe to the eternal, creative essence what we ascribe to corruptible, mutable bodies."¹⁰⁸ And as if in a direct response to Jews and Muslims, or for that matter Nestorians and Chalcedonians, he says, "Whoever slanders us for saying God was killed, and crucified, and died, is ignorant of our doctrines, and unaware of our intention."¹⁰⁹ For as Severus explains, "We say that the Messiah is creator, sustainer, living and knowing, in as much as he is God; and we say the Messiah eats, drinks, is killed, and died, in as much as he is man."¹¹⁰ The trouble is that, according to Severus, ordinary people do not take the trouble to express themselves exactly, nor do they have a proper understanding of the use of metaphor in speech. He puts it this way, "If the common people were to have an esteem for caution in expression, something crude would not occur to the listener."¹¹¹ One could almost say that it was Severus' purpose in the *Miṣbāh al-ʿAql* to provide a good example in precisely this matter.

4. *Postscript: Syriac in Tenth Century Egypt*

Just about at the same time as Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ was busy beginning to put Coptic thought into Arabic, Egypt was also the scene of an effort to preserve the ancient Syriac heritage of the Christians. So significant was this project for the modern knowledge of Egypt in this period that a word may be said about it here.

A Syrian Orthodox presence, already well established in Egypt by the tenth century, became more prominent during the first part of this century within the monastic centre of the Wadi Natrun, the site of ancient Scetis.¹¹² It was here at Deir Suriani, the Monastery of the Syrians,¹¹³ that a Syrian Jacobite monastic community flourished under the care of its multi-talented abbot, Moses of Nisibis (fl. 905-943).¹¹⁴ A bibliophile and gifted

¹⁰⁸ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 55.

¹⁰⁹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 57.

¹¹⁰ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 61.

¹¹¹ Samir, *The Lamp of Understanding*, 57.

¹¹² On Syriac-speaking Christians in Egypt see J.M. Fiey, "Coptes et syriaques; contacts et échanges," *Studia Orientalia Christiana Collectanea* 15 (1972-3), 297-365.

¹¹³ Jules Leroy wrote extensively about Deir Suriani over the course of some thirty years. A bibliography of his published works can be found in R.-G. Coquin, "L'abbé Jules Leroy," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 80 (1980), v-xv.

¹¹⁴ The rather scanty evidence extant for the life of Moses of Nisibis has been collected by J. Leroy, "Moïse de Nisibe," *Symposium Syriacum 1972* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 197; Rome, 1974), 457-70. See too the forthcoming paper of M.J. Blanchard, "Moses of Nisibis (fl. 906-943) and the Library of the Monastery of the Syrians," summarized in *Byzantine Studies Conference Abstracts* (1991), 45.

administrator, Moses left his mark on many aspects of the monastery. He substantially augmented the monastery library through an extensive programme of acquisitions, donations and the promotion of on-site scribal activity.¹¹⁵ The library acquisitions of Moses are marked by a high percentage of manuscripts of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries. Although the ancient library of Deir Suriani has now been dispersed to other institutions, notably to the British and Vatican Libraries, these manuscripts are the mainstay of modern scholarly studies of Syriac language and literature. Due in large part to the book acquisitions of Moses of Nisibis, credit for having preserved a very significant part of the literary heritage of Syriac Christianity must be given to Egypt, rather than the Syriac-speaking regions of Syria/Mesopotamia proper.

What we know about Moses comes from notes in the Syriac manuscripts of his monastery, as well as from two inscriptions in the monastery's church of the Virgin Mary, al-Hadra.¹¹⁶ A manuscript note attests to the presence of Moses at the monastery in 906/907.¹¹⁷ That Moses was *rīsh dayrā* or head of the monastery in 914 is borne out by one of the church inscriptions in which it is stated that Abbot Moses caused the *haykal* screen to be erected at that time.¹¹⁸ A second inscription in the church describes another building improvement carried out by Moses in 926/927.¹¹⁹ Notes in two Syriac manuscripts reveal that Moses went to Baghdad in 927 on account of a poll tax required of monks in Egypt.¹²⁰ The Muslim historian al-Maqrīzī in his *History of the Copts* recounted an effort in 925 by a vizier of the caliph al-Muqtadir to impose a poll tax on Christian bishops, monks and the sick in Egypt.¹²¹ He added that the Christians managed to have this measure over-

¹¹⁵ On the ancient Syriac library see H.G. Evelyn-White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'n Natrūn* (3 vols.; Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition, II, VII, VIII; New York, 1926-33). An historical sketch of the library, "Excursus: the Library of the Syrian Monastery," can be found in vol. II, 439-58. See also the forthcoming doctoral dissertation of M.J. Blanchard, "The Library of the Monastery of the Syrians" (The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.).

¹¹⁶ For the manuscript notes see n. 103 above. For the church inscriptions see J. Strzygowski, "Der Schmuck der älteren el-Hadrakirche im syrischen Kloster der sketischen Wüste," *Oriens Christianus* 1 (1901), 356-72.

¹¹⁷ See B.L. Add. 12142 described in Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. I, 97-8.

¹¹⁸ Leroy, "Moïse de Nisibe," 466-7; Strzygowski, "Der Schmuck der älteren el-Hadrakirche," 364-5.

¹¹⁹ Leroy, "Moïse de Nisibe," 467; Strzygowski, 367.

¹²⁰ B.L. Add. 14531, fol. 157b. See Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 740; and Evelyn-White, *Monasteries of the Wadi 'n Natrūn*, vol. II, plate VII. Also B.L. Add. 14445, fol. 48; W. Cureton, ed., *The Festal Letters of Athanasius discovered in an Ancient Syriac Version* (London: Printed for the Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts, 1848), xxv-vi.

¹²¹ W. Cureton, ed., *The Festal Letters of Athanasius*, xxiv; F. Wüstenfeld, *Macrizi's Geschichte*

turned by going to Baghdad to petition the caliph in person. Moses' return to the monastery in 932 is commemorated by a series of notes written in books that he brought back with him. During the five years that he was away Moses collected two hundred and fifty books for the library. The acquisition notes of 932 indicate that he obtained some books by purchase; others were given to him by persons as a blessing.¹²² The notes also show that Moses' journey was not limited to Baghdad, but that he sought out books elsewhere. At least, one note states outright that Moses purchased a book in Reshaina, a city in northern Iraq.¹²³ Although no explicit mention is made of visits by Moses to other cities, the notes do identify the residences of some of the donors and sellers with whom Moses conducted the book transactions. The cities include Edessa, Harran, and Takrit. Although Moses himself claimed Nisibis, the intellectual centre of East Syrian Christianity, as home, it does not figure in the notes.

Moses of Nisibis left a valuable legacy for modern scholars of Syriac. His effort to build a great library for Deir Suriani insured the survival in many cases of ancient Syriac manuscripts that had been removed from the churches, monasteries and towns of Syria/Mesopotamia to the more secluded location of the monastery in the desert of Scetis. As for Moses himself, after his return from Baghdad in 932, he is known to have commissioned two books in 936.¹²⁴ Our latest recorded mention of him appears in a note written in a volume of funeral services with a date of A.D. 943. The scribe, who was writing at Ramla in Palestine, praised Moses as: "Mar Moses, our glory and the ornament of all the church, the head of this Monastery."¹²⁵

Summary

After a brief sketch of the career of the Coptic bishop Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, and a survey of his published works in Arabic, the article concentrates on the author's important text called *The Lamp of Understanding* (*Kitāb*

der Copten; aus den Handschriften su Gotha und Wien mit Übersetzung und Anmerkungen (Göttingen, 1845), 25 (Arabic), 62 (German).

¹²² Little has been written about Syriac book production and book trade. See, however, M.M. Mango, "Patrons and Scribes indicated in Syriac Manuscripts, 411 to 800 A.D.," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32/4 (1982), 3-12. For the wider context of the Byzantine sphere, see A. Cutler, "The Social Status of Byzantine Scribes, 800-1500. A Statistical Analysis based on Vogel-Garthausen," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 74 (1981), 328-34; C. Mango, "The Availability of Books in the Byzantine Empire, A.D. 750-850," in *Byzantine Books and Bookmen* (Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium, 1971; Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1975), 29-45.

¹²³ B.L. Add. 17182, ff. 1-99. See W. Wright, *Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. II, 404.

¹²⁴ B.L. Add. 14645 and B.L. Add. 14469.

¹²⁵ B.L. Add. 14525, ff. 1-10. See Evelyn-White, *Monasteries of the Wādī ʿn Natrūn*, vol. II, 338.